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On Jewish Resistance:  
An Essay On Perceptions.

by

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**ON JEWISH RESISTANCE:  
AN ESSAY ON PERCEPTIONS<sup>1</sup>**

by

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## **INTRODUCTION**

During the late 1950s, when I was a graduate student in sociology, Everett Hughes was the guru of Canadian students at the University of Chicago. He not only provided us with a welcoming atmosphere, but also with a quite unique perspective on sociological research and analysis. Two features of that perspective have stayed with me ever since and have shaped my own thinking to a considerable extent. The first one was his insight that a great deal might be learned by comparing groups that at first blush seem to have nothing in common. The second one was his urging us to look for what is not there. It was this second injunction that made me wonder why there was so little attention being paid in studies of the Holocaust to the resistance of the victims?

A more immediate spur to writing this paper was the appearance of a brief article on "The truth about Jewish resistance." (Eric Brothers, 1992) which not only bemoans that so few people know about it, but also refers to "The few books and articles that have been written about Jewish resistance." While I heartily agree with the first point, the second one seemed to require rebuttal. It is not only important to point out that it is

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factually incorrect, but the very volume of that literature makes the wide-spread ignorance of it all the more puzzling.

My original intent was to rectify this error by adding to this paper an exhaustive bibliography of relevant works in English. This language restriction seemed essential to making this project manageable. I was already aware of the fact that most of the relevant literature is published in other languages and is much more voluminous than the part available in English. The attached bibliography will indicate that I actually started on this task. Fortunately, I soon stumbled on to the "Bibliography on Holocaust Literature." by Edelheit and Edelheit (1986) which lists over 9,000 items, all in English and organized into subject categories. The category labeled "resistance" contains over 1,000 items. I recommend their perusal to all who are under the impression that there is little literature on Jewish resistance.

This frustration with the relative absence of awareness of Jewish resistance is not confined to the English-speaking world. Hermann Langbein, writing in German, shares this perception and contributes a very detailed account of resistance actions in order to show that they are deserving of our attention (1980, p.8). Among other details, he gives the known number of escapes from Auschwitz by year of occurrence; his total is 647 of whom 270 were caught, however (p.274). This information should be particularly impressive to those who were under the impression that escape from Auschwitz was impossible. He adds a bibliography with over 400 entries, mostly in German, which does not seem to have impressed a wide readership in that language. The only country where such awareness seems to be wide-spread is Israel.

A further point made by Eric Brothers is that Jewish resistance has

been relegated to footnote status in many histories of the Holocaust. Such footnote treatment has been sometimes positive and sometimes negative. But in either case such treatment has undoubtedly contributed both to the general ignorance about Jewish resistance and to its misinterpretation.

This assessment agrees with the findings of Glickman and Bardikoff that resistance is all but ignored in the treatment of the Holocaust in history and social science textbooks (1982, pp. 23-24). Even in university courses dealing explicitly with some aspect of the Holocaust only a minority seem to give prominence to resistance. Shimoni (1991) has collected the course outline of 26 courses taught in seven countries. Even though Israel is overrepresented in his sample of countries, there is no mention of resistance in fifteen of these course outlines. At the extreme of non-treatment are, of course, authors like Jørgen Hæstrup who has managed to write a "complete history" of European resistance movements without so much as mentioning Jewish resistance, not even the Warsaw ghetto uprising (1981).

Such treatment stands in marked contrast to Henri Michel's assessment that "Jewish resistance wrote one more magnificent page of history to prove the fighting qualities of the Jewish race and its will to live." (1972, p.180)

## **JEWISH RESISTANCE TO NAZI VICTIMIZATION**

The German Jews were the first victims and they were faced by a situation that nobody could have predicted. They were also living in a state where the possession of arms was a crime and where even going into hiding was not a realistic possibility, partly because in such a densely populated country there are few places to hide, and partly because the law specified

that everyone had to report their address to the police, and changing one's address without notifying the police was in itself already a crime. Under these circumstances the only kind of resistance possible was emigration which was limited by the scarcity of countries that were willing to accept Jewish refugees.

In spite of such difficulties, there have been instances of Jewish resistance in Germany. Perhaps one of the most dramatic was the successful effort of large numbers of Jews to hide and to survive in Berlin. They managed to do this in spite of Goebbels' declaration of 10 June 1943 that Berlin was now 'judenrein' (cleaned of Jews) (Wolfgang Benz, p.753)

While Jews were involved in resistance activities in all countries under nazi influence, they were normally members of the national resistance organizations of their home country. There were minor exceptions to this, as for instance in occupied Paris and in Berlin. The major exception occurred in Poland where wide-spread antisemitism prevented such integration, except on a quite minor scale. The result was that Jewish resistance in Poland differed from other resistance movements in several important respects: it received no support from its national government, nor from their allies; it had to rely on itself, with only minor exceptions; and it had to defend itself against non-Jewish resistance movements. In addition to the serious differences that these conditions created, it also had to face a language problem of major proportions. Many Polish Jews did not speak a fluent Polish that would have allowed them to either pass under cover as Poles or to collaborate with the Polish underground. In addition, Jews from all nazi-occupied countries were being sent to ghettos and concentration camps in Poland. To the extent that many of these Jews were Jewish only by the definitions of the Nuremberg racial laws, or were secular assimilated

Jews who spoke neither Yiddish nor Hebrew, they had no means of communicating with their fellow Jews, or with the Polish population, or perhaps even with their nazi captors.

In spite of handicaps that no other resistance movement had to face, Jewish resistance in Poland achieved many successes and was a thorn in the side of the German authorities. In addition to the Warsaw ghetto uprising, some resistance activities took place in almost one hundred ghettos (Bauer, 1989, p. 133) and most concentration camps, as well as in the forests of Eastern Poland (see: Isaac Kowalski, Shmul Krakowski and Yuri Suhl among many others). These activities ranged from the destruction of killing facilities in several camps, to the smuggling out of information to the allies, to the disruption of railway lines, to maintaining contacts between resistance groups in different parts of Poland, and to forging of papers and helping escapees. These activities need not be expanded on here because they are well-documented in a large and growing literature. What remains a puzzle is why this literature has remained largely unknown, even to some people with a serious interest in the history of the Holocaust.

".... the world knows little or nothing about the other side of the Holocaust picture: Jewish resistance - how the Jews struck back at their tormentors. The epic Warsaw Ghetto uprising is famous, but it is not generally known that in practically every ghetto and in every labor and concentration camp there existed a Jewish underground organization that kept up the prisoners' morale, reduced their physical sufferings, committed acts of sabotage, organized escapes, collected arms, planned revolts, and, in many instances, carried them out." Yuri Suhl, 1967, p.1.

This was written 25 years ago, and it seems just as true to-day.

## THE WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING

The Warsaw ghetto uprising demands our special attention because it is the one instance of armed Jewish resistance that is widely known, and because it has generated a very large body of literature. That literature illustrates many of the biases that have minimized and devalued Jewish resistance and partisan activities. It is therefore instructive to take a closer look at that literature.

The Warsaw ghetto uprising started on 19 April 1943 in response to the German order to liquidate the entire ghetto in three days. The ensuing struggle has been widely celebrated and memorialized. These events have been well-documented from several perspectives. From the Jewish side we have several survivor accounts as well as those from the Jewish National Committee; from the German side we have the official Stroop report by the commander of the German forces that were ordered to subdue the uprising; and from the Polish side we have several reports issued by the Home Army and the Department of Internal Affairs of the Polish Government Delegacy (Krakowski, 1984, p. 183).

The detached reader might have expected that these sources would have been used to construct a fairly factual picture of what happened, and a few authors have, in fact, attempted to do so. But that detached reader would be very disappointed because it turns out that the German version of events, as recorded in the Stroop report, is given the greatest credibility in much of the literature. One can only speculate about the possible reasons for this undue attention. The fact that the author was the commanding officer of the German forces, that he produced this document as his official report, that the German reputation for accuracy, efficiency, and reliability preceded him, all may have played a role in this unwarranted attribution of

credibility. It is unwarranted for several reasons. One reason is that a German officer is likely to emphasize the successes of his troops and to play down those of the enemy - especially when that enemy has long been characterized as vermin that does not belong to human kind, as exploiting others, as cowardly, etc. Another reason why such attribution of credibility is unwarranted is that the Stroop report contains much information that is contradicted by other sources. Some of these discrepancies have been analyzed by Yisrael Gutman (1982, ch. 14) and by Shmuel Krakowski (1984, ch. 10). A few examples will illustrate: the Stroop report includes a list of the units under his command that fought in the ghetto. It also reports the use of howitzers and a list of casualties. But none of the units listed were equipped with howitzers (Krakowski, p. 185) and some of the casualties belonged to units that were not listed as involved in the ghetto fighting (Krakowski, 192). Stroop's own adjutant confirmed the use of the units mentioned by Stroop, but reports much higher numbers of personnel in these units (Krakowski, p.186). Also, Stroop never mentioned the use of the air force although this has been confirmed by many eyewitness reports (Krakowski, p. 185). Another example illustrates the point even better. Stroop declared that on May 16th the campaign had been successfully concluded and he entitled his report "The Warsaw ghetto is no more." But he forgot to tell this to those resistance fighters who were still inside the ghetto and who had decided to hold out to the bitter end. A small number of Jews kept fighting for many months more. We know this from reports of shooting in the ghetto and of further bombing by the Germans (Gutman, 1982, p. 400; Taylor and Shaw, 1987, p.347) . Finally, it is worth quoting Ber Mark (1975):

The last recorded report of a Jewish fighting group wandering through the ruins of the ghetto is dated June 1944. The Polish underground publication, *Eastern and National Information*,

wrote on July 7, 1944, that in June of that year a Jewish group attacked a detachment of gendarmes that happened to pass the ghetto area in broad daylight, killing three German. The German immediately ordered a round-up. They caught and shot twenty-five Jews. (p. 114)

That a small group of untrained resistance fighters with few and partly home-made weapons should be able to stand up to the might of German arms deserves to be celebrated in the collective memory of all people and especially the Jews - and it really is not terribly important whether that stand lasted one month, or one year, or even longer. What is important is to credit the Jewish partisans in the forests and the Jewish resistance fighters in the ghettos and the concentration camps with a true measure of their achievements. Much of this has been done by Gutman, Krakowski, Suhl, and others - but unfortunately their work is not widely known.

Finally, it is worth quoting Albert Speer who was Hitler's minister of war production. He was not at all concerned with the fighting in the ghetto and does not even mention it directly. His only concern is that "... in this situation, there was a greater danger that fleeing Jews would join the partisan movement, which had long since brought catastrophic confusion to the supply lines for the German army." (1981, p. 269)

#### **REASONS WHY JEWISH RESISTANCE IS SO LITTLE KNOWN.**

A full answer to the question posed in this paper will have to wait for further research and analysis. There seem to be a fairly large number of reasons why so little is known about Jewish resistance, only a few of which can be briefly mentioned here.

Historically, Jews have not been allowed to bear arms in most of the

countries of the diaspora. Therefore, when they were attacked, they were not able to defend themselves. In some situations, their protector would defend them. If not, they only had a choice between hiding and fleeing. (Malcolm Hay, 1992) This is the origin of the antisemitic canard that Jews are cowards. It may also be at the root of the Jewish self-criticism that asks why they went like lambs to their slaughter. This is a peculiarly Jewish question that has been attacked unmercifully by Yehuda Bauer as a form of self hatred. He points to the tens of millions of non-Jewish Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, and other nationalities who were killed by the nazis without offering any resistance and none of whom were accused by their compatriots of having gone like lambs to their slaughter ((Bauer, 1989, p. 219-220)

Much of the literature on the Holocaust and on Jewish resistance relies on German sources. There are several reasons for this. The Germans kept voluminous records, many of which survived the war in spite of the nazis' order to destroy those dealing with anti-Jewish activities to prevent their falling into enemy hands. These records have often been accepted as the authoritative statements of events due to the long-established reputation of Germans for efficiency, thoroughness, and bureaucratic orderliness. What was not often taken into account were the rather obvious sources of bias in the reporting of Jewish resistance. The nazis underreported all kinds of resistance, for obvious reasons. But Jewish resistance was especially damaging, considering that it came from the very people whom they had branded as sub-humans incapable of resisting their superior racial endowment.. Thus, military and SS officers were understandably reluctant to report the successes of Jewish resistance and

the difficulties they experienced in controlling and suppressing it. The classic example is the above-discussed Stroop report that hardly could admit that suppressing the Warsaw ghetto revolt took more time than the conquests of either Poland or France.

Prominent Jewish writers on the Holocaust (esp. Hilberg) have dismissed Jewish resistance as very limited and ineffectual, as have quite a number of non-Jewish sources. They arrived at such conclusions by applying definitional standards to Jewish resistance that did not apply to non-Jewish resistance. The former they considered only when it was armed and inflicted significant defeats on the enemy, while non-Jewish resistance needed to fill neither criterion. Instead, a great many ancillary activities, from hiding people to monitoring illegal radio transmissions and producing false identity papers, counted as being an appropriate part of resistance activities. Clearly, application of such a double standard leads to the denigration or ignoring of Jewish resistance.

The inattention to resistance for about a generation after the events was probably part of the general reluctance to talk or write about the Holocaust. There were, of course, exceptions; but they are a very small part of the volume of Holocaust literature that has appeared since then. We still have no fully satisfactory explanation for this extraordinary reluctance to address the Holocaust for about a generation after the event. Many of the explanations that have invoked psychological variables are not adequate by themselves. After all, it took the Library of Congress until 1968, fully 25 years after the news of the Holocaust had reached the West, to introduce the category "Holocaust" into its classification system; and the Library of Congress can hardly be accused of being affected by the same psychological

variables that produced a similar time lag among Jewish authors. But our question remains unanswered: why did Jewish resistance share in this period of embarrassed silence rather than become part of the general resistance literature that appeared so much earlier?

There are, of course, other reasons that could be cited. For instance, why is it that a major Jerusalem institution like Yad Vashem celebrates the contributions of Righteous Gentiles, while the celebration of Jewish resistance fighters is left to a kibbutz north of Acre, Lohame Hageta'ot (the Ghetto Fighters House)? Do we really prefer to remember the victims of the Holocaust as lambs that were led to their slaughter?

One might also point to the fact that much of the relevant literature is not published by big, well-known publishers who are able to invest heavily in publicity and marketing. A glance at the attached bibliography will confirm this point. But perhaps enough has been said to prove that Jewish resistance deserves to be much better known and also that it deserves a greater place in the history of the Holocaust.

### **Conclusion**

It is probably true, as has been claimed by Hilberg and others, that resistance did not materially affect the outcome of the war. Individual actions often were successful in the sense that they achieved what they set out to accomplish. But in an age of technological warfare, involving tanks and planes, no amount of underground and partisan activity was likely to change the final outcome. In fact, if it had done so, it would hardly be called a resistance movement. If it had changed the final outcome we would now be talking about a revolution, a civil war, or a counter offensive.

But there is another perspective in which to examine resistance

activities. They represent a way in which people in occupied countries can express their disagreement with the oppressor: they can affirm that they are not just unimportant slaves doing the bidding of the master race; they can express their human dignity, both individually and collectively. This affirmation of their freedom and their dignity is what earns the resistors a place in the collective memory of future generations. Thus, occupied countries continue to remember and honour their resistance movements; their literature celebrates them and their special nomenclature has become a part of their language.

This brings me back to the question that started this paper: why is Jewish resistance, with the glowing exception of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, quite unknown among most of us and almost forgotten? Is it because the Jews did not have a country, that they were not entitled to make resistance part of their collective memory? Or is it because Jews were perceived as, and saw themselves as, the perennial victims of persecution, that they are not entitled to affirmations of their individual and collective dignity? Or is it because Jews have internalized the antisemitic view of their own inferiority, that they are unable to celebrate affirmations of their ability to deal with crises of survival?

Or does the explanation lie in the motivations of the authors and their readers? The majority of the authors who celebrate Jewish resistance in their writing are themselves survivors who participated in or benefitted from the activities of resistance movements. They have good reasons for wanting to celebrate the achievements of resistance because they want the truth to be known and because they want to counteract the canard about the lambs going to their slaughter. However, the majority of the Jews in the

Western world have lost members of their families in the Holocaust. Thus, when they read about the Holocaust they are mourning the loss of their relatives and are trying to understand what cannot be understood. Reading about resistance does not help them in their mourning nor in their understanding; therefore it recedes into the background.

I still do not know the full answers to these questions, and perhaps I shall never know them. But instead of waiting for someone to produce such answers, let us make the questions irrelevant by acknowledging with pride the enormous efforts and sacrifices that Jewish resistors have made during the nazi years in order to affirm their dignity and ours.

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